



TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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Meeting of the St. Johnsbury Select Board December 23rd, 2024 @ 6:00 pm

Present-

Select Board: Steve Isham, Frank Empsall, Tracy Zschau, Dennis Smith, Brendan Hughes

Staff: Chad Whitehead, Rachel Waterhouse, Matthew Walsh, Kresten Sterling, Collin-Alan Gillespie, Bradley Reed, Joel Pierce, Joe Kasprzak, Stacy Jewell (via zoom), Lesley Russ (via zoom)

Public: KATV, Richard Boisseau, Jim Brown, Jason Mauks, Deb Dolgin, Amanda Cochrane, Ashley Van Zandt, Lauren Jarvi (via zoom), Tim Angell, Issiah, Gillian Sewake (via zoom),

Agenda Amendments:

- None

Public Comment:

- Ashley Van Zandt from Catamount Arts discussed the upcoming First Night event in Saint Johnsbury, which is the last remaining First Night event in the state and all of Northern New England. The event, scheduled for December 31st, will feature about 70 performances, 175 artists, in 14 venues. There will be multiple food offerings. The roads on Main Street and Eastern Avenue will be closed, but Western Avenue will remain open. The event will end with a midnight dance party at Newall.
- Deb Dolgin asked if they were looking for volunteers. Ashley said yes those interested in volunteering should visit firstnightnorth.org.
- Deb Dolgin asked when the drawing for the car was going to be held. Ashley said the car drawing would be held at 7:30 pm. Buttons for the event are on sale at the St. Johnsbury School, the Information Booth and Catamount Arts.

Minutes:

- On a motion by Dennis and second by Tracy to approve the minutes from the Dec. 9th meeting with the noted corrections. All in favor.

Warrants:

- On a motion by Frank and second by Dennis to table the warrants. All in favor.

Liquor and Tobacco Licenses:

- None

FY26 Budget Presentation:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager started by introducing the Select Board and himself. He discussed the town's budget process, highlighting the role of the town manager's office, department heads, and the select board in its development. He explained the budget's structure, including the general fund, special services fund, highway fund, and recreation fund. He also detailed the expenses for each fund, including labor costs, maintenance, and equipment. He noted that the budget does not continue to use unobligated general fund reserves to lessen the impact on taxes, instead aiming to use reserves for their intended purposes. The budget does include a request to use \$150,000 from highway unobligated reserves to offset the tax rate. The presentation also included discussion on the impact of the budget on taxes, both inside and outside the special services district. He concluded by explaining the tax rate increases per \$100,000 of assessed value.
- Chad requested a Special Select Board meeting to discuss the proposed budget and get public input. The Board agreed to host a Special Select Board meeting on Wednesday Jan. 8th at 6 pm at the Welcome Center.
- Steve Isham mentioned that the increase in the insurance benefit alone was 60%-70%. Chad explained that it was a significant impact because of health insurance.
- Dennis encouraged the Board to consider adding the Recreation increase as a special appropriations stating that this would give the Board a better idea of the community support. Chad mentioned that it could be another separate item that would be voted on if the board wished.
- Dennis asked if the Recreation Department needed to be a part of the Town government.
- Tracy asked if isn't a Town employee who is it.
- Dennis asked if it would be run by a committee.
- Tracy explained that she thought it this coming year would be more of a hybrid year and things would be figured out during that year.
- Steve Isham asked if any of the funds from FEMA due to the recent summer storms was included in the proposed budget. Chad said no. He explained that the FEMA funds would pay the debt and then if there were any remaining funds it would be up to the Select Board on how to use them.
- Jim Brown asked if the Beautification Committee budget was included in the general fund budget. Chad said yes.
- Jim Brown asked how much was budgeted. Chad said \$18,000 for operations and \$2,000 for repairs.
- Brendan thanked Steve Beaugard for reinforcing the sidewalk fund.
- Tim Angell asked about the unrestricted highway reserve transfer. Chad mentioned that currently the unrestricted highway reserve has \$547,000 and the Town is proposing using \$150,000 in the 2026 budget to help offset the tax impact.

Bay Street Project Update:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager provided an update on the Bay Street Project. He highlighted that funding sources from the project including LVRT Transportation Grant funds around \$960,000 to extend the LVRT and enhance the path. Funding in the amount of \$547,000 from Leahy's Office. Announced his intent to provide the Select Board with a bond article for Town Meeting for the funding to complete the water side of the project. This would include a better water connection in turn providing for more redundancy within the system. He explained that he will be coming back to the Select Board on Jan. 13th with the Bay Street Water Bond Article.

Cemetery Commission Transfer:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that the Cemetery Commission created a reserve fund at the end of 2023 and has \$3,200 to transfer to the reserve fund. Currently the \$3,200 is sitting in the unobligated general fund reserves.
- Dennis asked what the Cemetery Commission reserve funds could be used for. Chad explained that it would be up to the Cemetery Commission to decide that.
- Dennis asked if there was any restrictions. Chad said the funds would have to be used for things related to the cemeteries.
- On a motion by Brendan and second by Dennis to approve moving \$3,200 from the unobligated general fund reserves to the cemetery commission reserves. All in favor.

Readiness to Serve Transfer:

- Joe Kasprzak, Assistant Town Manager approached the Select Board regarding the Readiness to Serve Transfer. He explained that annually he comes to the Select Board to request that \$30,000 from the Readiness to Serve payments be transferred to the Economic Development Reserves. He mentioned that currently the Economic Development Reserves has a balance of \$188,000 and by adding the \$30,000 it will bring the total to \$218,000.
- Steve Isham asked Joe the number of incentives he is working on. Joe said there are about 6-8 good projects that will hopefully be moving forward.
- On a motion by Dennis and second by Brendan to approve the transfer of \$30,000 from the Readiness to Serve payments to the Economic Development Reserves. All in favor.

Housing Transfer:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that Kresten Sterling, Code Compliance Officer has requested that that \$148,032 be moved from housing reserves to the general fund to cover the awarded grants through the Rental Housing Improvement Grant Program. He explained that the grant awards have been approved by the Select Board which resulted in an expense of \$279,014. By transferring the \$148,032 to the general fund payments to the awardees will be able to be completed.
- On a motion by Brendan and second by Dennis to authorize the transfer of \$148,032 from the housing reserve fund to the general fund to cover the Rental Housing Improvement Grant Program awards. All in favor.

Authorization of Reward Payment:

- The Select Board discussed the authorization of a reward payment for information leading to the arrest of Scott Mason. Steve Isham highlighted that the Select Board held an Emergency Select Board meeting on Dec 14th to approve offering a reward for information leading to the arrest of Scott Mason. The board unanimously approved the offering of a reward, which led to Mason's arrest within 10 hours. The information provided by Antino Pepper proved timely and accurate, leading to Mason's apprehension. Steve Isham highlighted the email from Major David Petersen regarding the role Antino Pepper played in the apprehension of Scott Mason.
- Chief Pierce had nothing to add.
- Frank mentioned that it was pretty straight forward.

- On a motion by Dennis and second by Frank to award the reward funds of \$25,000 to Antino Pepper to be paid out of the Special Services Reserve Fund. All in favor.
- Tim Angell asked if the Board had considered not giving out the reward until the conclusion of the investigation. He urged the Board to consider paying out the \$25,000 over the course of 12-18 months stating he felt that giving it to him all at once could cause troubles. Dennis explained that the Board agreed to award the \$25,000 to anyone who provided a lead that resulted in the arrest of Scott Mason.
- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that Vermont State Police has urged the Town to pay out the reward.
- Frank explained that there were no other stipulations to the reward of \$25,000.
- Dennis mentioned that the FBI reward of \$25,000 would be given at the conclusion of the investigation.
- Jim Brown explained that he felt the Select Board was just following through with what they said they would do.
- Tim Angell mentioned that it is our problem and people have fallen victim to it.
- Chief Joel Pierce stated that he agreed that the reward of \$25,000 led to the capture of Scott Mason and needed to be paid out. He explained that Scott Mason was a violent threat to the community and a public servant was shot.
- Steve Isham explained that the reward led to an arrest and the Select Board needed to make good on their statement and authorize the payment.
- Tim Angell mentioned that he understood the need to pay out the reward but said the Town was under no obligation to pay it out all at once.

Fees and Fines:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that his office has been reviewing the current Town's fees and fines. He explained that they have been compared to other Towns within the region. He mentioned that currently the Town Zoning permit fee is \$55 for any project. The Zoning Administrator has recommended increasing the fee to \$100 plus 5 cents per square foot. Chad explained that he has reviewed the increase recommendation and is in agreement with it. Chad mentioned that the increase would increase the Zoning revenue from around \$6,000 to \$30,000 and would be move inline with similar communities in Vermont.
- Brendan asked if the rates would be more compatible with other Vermont Towns. Chad said yes.
- Jim Brown asked what Towns it would be more consistent with. Matt Walsh, Zoning Administrator said Lyndonville, Burke, Newport were a few examples. He explained that the Wiedman expansion would have brought in \$3,000 to \$5,000 in other communities but here it only brought in \$110. Revenue is missing significantly.
- Jim Brown asked how the increases would affect the bylaws. Chad explained that the bylaws had nothing to do with the fees as the fees are established by the Town Manager's Office and approved by the Select Board. This provides flexibility to make adjustments as needed.
- Brendan asked if the change would take effect based on the Town calendar. Chad explained that it could take effect whenever the Board sees fit. Joe mentioned that in the past the fees and fines have been brought to the Select Board in December with an effective date of January 1st.
- Chad explained that the Water and Sewer rates go to the Select Board in April with an effective date of July 1st.
- Brendan mentioned that it would be nice to give citizens who are currently planning a project a little bit of a window.
- Tracy asked if the Board could set any date. Chad said yes.

- Joe agreed with Brendan that a window was important with fee changes but explained that the change was very low here.
- Matt mentioned that the current fees and fines are much lower than other communities and is one of the lowest within the State. He explained that before proposing the changes he looked at the fees and fines of over 16 communities.
- Chad mentioned that it made sense to make them effective July 1st, 2025.

Town Manager's Report:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager provided the following report.
- Captain Gray is home and recovering.
- Chief Pierce has done an outstanding job getting coverage so employees can get time off to connect with Mental Health resources.
- Chad thanked the board for the support through all this.
- Highlighted the strong community support that the Police Department, Town and Captain Gray. Thanked everyone for pitching in.

Other Business:

- Jim Brown provided a bylaw modernization update. He highlighted that Jan. 21st the Planning Commission will have a Public Hearing regarding the updates.
- Tim Angell voiced concerns over the street lights being out on Eastern Ave, Main Street and Mill Street.
- Brendan mentioned the shoes on the power lines in the area of 98 Mill Street.

Executive Session:

- None

On a motion by Tracy and second by Dennis the board adjourned by unanimous decision.

December 23rd Select Board Meeting Video:

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/EdrCl2ehY9ADtfQuHQ620Hc_bxlQSNTOTs7Xwsu6K4BvJXZlqBXTmTt0WIC37p1k.Kue9u8Ope1GG7gHc

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